

CAPTIONED TELEPHONE VCO RELAY SERVICE

The Service

Captioned telephone voice carry over (VCO) relay service allows a user to call a party directly and automatically be connected to the captioned telephone VCO service. A communications assistant (CA) then re-voices what is said by the responding party and uses state-of-the-art voice recognition to have that speech converted into near-real-time to text, which is displayed on the caller's captioned telephone. The caller can then use his or her residual hearing to hear the other party's voice over the phone, and simultaneously read the captions for clarification. The call may also be initiated by someone calling to the captioned telephone user.

Captioned telephone VCO relay service is a technically upgraded and improved version of VCO that allows far faster and more functionally equivalent VCO communication without cumbersome interactions with an operator. FCC rules define VCO as "a reduced form of TRS where the person with the hearing disability is able to speak directly to the other end user." Captioned telephone VCO operates at a much faster speed than ordinary VCO – at a minimum of 125 words per minute (wpm) and often at speeds between 150 and 200 wpm – thereby allowing the person with a hearing loss to receive simultaneous text along with the voice of the hearing party. In addition to allowing greater spontaneity and a far more natural flow to the conversation, an added advantage of captioned telephone VCO is that the CA remains completely transparent and does not interrupt the parties for any purpose. In addition, CAs are not needed to "set up" captioned telephone VCO calls – the user simply dials the number of the person he or she is calling just as a hearing person would. The connection to the service is completely automated.

Fulfilling an Unmet Need

- Captioned telephone VCO appeals to people with hearing loss whose telephone needs have not been met by other types of relay services. These are people who use their residual hearing, spoken language, and technology, including hearing aids, cochlear implants, and assistive listening devices, to communicate. They typically do not sign, but rather are accustomed to listening and speaking for themselves over standard phones. But they often have difficulty hearing all parts of the conversation on their own; the captions provided by this service fill in what they miss.
- Captioned telephone VCO provides functionally equivalent service to people whose needs have not been met by other forms of relay services.
- Captioned telephone VCO enables these individuals to remain productive and independent: people who lose their hearing later in life can keep their jobs, senior citizens can prevent isolation and get the services that they need to continue living on their own, teenagers can have the privacy they need to develop social relationships and build their self-esteem.

History

- July 1991 – The FCC included a requirement for VCO in the first set of mandatory minimum relay standards. Although this enabled people with hearing loss to use their voices to speak directly to their called parties, they were forced to continually return the handset to the TTY coupler each time the CA typed back responses.
- March 2000 – The FCC mandated a minimum typing speed of 60 words per minute for CAs to speed the transmission of text-based relay calls.
- June 2003 – The FCC mandated 2-line VCO, so that people with hearing loss could speak directly to their parties on 1 line and read their responses on a second line (without having to repeatedly lift up and put down the handset on the TTY coupler). However, this form of VCO has not been widely used because it requires 2 telephone lines, 3-way calling, and the cognitive ability and dexterity to set up the call quickly before being disconnected.
- August 2003 – The FCC approved captioned telephone VCO relay service as a form of enhanced VCO eligible for reimbursement from the Interstate TRS Fund. Now parties can speak directly, simultaneously read responses at a much faster speed, and use residual hearing to hear their called party's voice without any CA intervention.
- July 2005 – The FCC approved 2-line captioned telephone VCO relay service. With 2-line service, the captioned telephone user's phone operates like a conventional voice telephone with all its attendant features (e.g., call waiting, *69, call waiting, and call forwarding).
- October 2005 – 36 organizations petitioned the FCC to mandate captioned telephone VCO. Consumers also asked the FCC to approve an Internet version of this service. Comments submitted in response were overwhelmingly favorable to both requests.

Nationwide status: Three years after FCC initial approval (in 2003):

- 10 states plus the D.C. still do not and have no plans to offer captioned telephone VCO.
- The vast majority of states that do offer this service limit its availability, some allowing as few as 5 to 10 state residents to be added each month. States have long waiting lists.
- Many states prohibit outreach, advertising or any other type of promotion to keep down demand and visibility of this service.
- Captioned telephone VCO service by Federal Relay makes available 50 phones per month (an average of one per state), and only for qualifying active and retired Federal employees, veterans, and U.S. Tribal members for calls to, from, and within the federal government.

A Mandate is Needed to Achieve Functional Equivalency in Compliance with the Act

- 1991: When the FCC approved VCO, it explained that its regulations should not “discourage or impair the development of improved technology that fosters the availability of telecommunications services to the disabled.” Because VCO reduced the average length of calls and resulted in lower blockage rates, the FCC found that VCO was “essential to implement functionally equivalent TRS.”

- 2003: When the FCC approved captioned telephone VCO, it defined this service as “simply an innovative way of providing VCO TRS service.” Noting that captioned telephone VCO “is an example of just the type of advancement that the Commission contemplated when it called for innovation in TRS,” the FCC went on to explain that this form of VCO is “less intrusive and more natural for the call participants, and that users who become hearing impaired later in life may find it easier to adjust to captioned telephone VCO service than to traditional TRS services.” The Commission concluded that “captioned telephone VCO service will reach a segment of the population that has traditionally not been well serviced by current TRS options . . . and that this service “will provide greater functional equivalence for those people who prefer VCO TRS.”
- 2006: Captioned telephone VCO remains the *only* form of relay service found to be functionally equivalent to voice telephone services for a specific segment of people with hearing loss that is not required to be made equally available to all Americans.